The Power of the Pentatonic Scale

A pentatonic scale is a musical scale with five notes per octave - in contrast to a heptatonic (seven note) scale, such as the major and minor scales.

As the name suggests, the pentatonic scale is a five note scale. It is easily the most widely used scale throughout world music including rock, pop, blues, jazz and other contemporary and traditional genres of music. It differs from the major scale in that there are two notes missing. Musicians evaluate all chords and scales according to the major scale. It's our benchmark, if you will. So, if you took the fourth and seventh note out of the major scale you would have the major pentatonic scale. Yep, it's as simple as that!

But there is something special about the pentatonic scale that makes it sound unique and why it's so widely used. Think about the ingredients in a recipe. A simple recipe with three or four ingredients can often times taste better than something with 30 ingredients. In the case of notes, more is not always better. If we are comparing the major pentatonic scale to the major scale, then the notes represented would be one, two, three, five and six. Remember we said that the fourth and seventh notes of the major scale are not played.

The minor pentatonic has the same shape, but as you will see in the diagram that follows, would be played in a different place. If you already know the minor scale, then just take out the 2nd and 6th scale degrees (notes) - everything else stays the same. If this part does not make sense to you, hang in there. You can also learn this by memorizing and knowing how to use the forms.

So how would we actually use this scale? Play an A minor pentatonic scale over an A minor chord progression and it will sound pleasant to the ear. For instance, have a friend play this progression: A-, C, F, G. Then play an A minor pentatonic scale over that and you will find that it is "harmonic" to your ear. The G major pentatonic scale played over a G major chord progression will also sound harmonic to your ear. Have a friend play this progression: G, G, C, D and play a G major pentatonic scale over that and you will find it pleasing to your ear. Note that you must use the associated minor pentatonic scale over a minor chord progression. Conversely, you must use the associated major pentatonic scale over a major chord progression. For instance, if my chord progression is in "A minor", then I would use the A minor pentatonic scale. If my chord progression was in "A major", then I would use the A major pentatonic scale over the top of it and it would sound harmonic.

These are good "rules of thumb" to follow, however, music is art and technically ***there are no rules in art!*** Anything goes! I say that for two reasons. The first reason, if you play music long enough, you will discover every rule being broken at one point or another. The second reason is to free your mind from rules that might limit you in music. With that being preached, it was Bach who said, "Remember all the rules...and then forget them". There have been several other musical greats that have said similar things, so adhere to this wise knowledge. For instance, in blues it is common practice to play a minor pentatonic scale over a major chord progression. "But you just said..."! I know! Musical rules can be broken, but not before you learn how to do it the right way first. Try it for yourself. Check out my lesson on the 12 bar blues progression. The chord progression that I cover is A7, D7 and E7. Those three chords are major chords. In fact, when played together, those three chords create a chord progression that suggests A major is the key. However, the A minor pentatonic scale sounds great over this. Try it out for yourself with a friend. In fact, try both the A minor pentatonic scale and the A major pentatonic scale and see how differently each one sounds.

So what can you do now that you have this knowledge? Well, in short you can play melodies over nearly every chord progression that you hear. In order to do this, first find out in what key the song is. If it is in a major key, use the associated major pentatonic scale over the top and "noodle" around with the notes to create melodies. A lot of Tom Petty's songs use the pentatonic scale, but again he doesn't make it a rule, it just happens a lot. Conversely, if the song is in a minor key, use the associated minor pentatonic scale to noodle over the top of it. Get it? If it's an A minor chord progression, then use an A minor pentatonic scale. If it's a G# major chord

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progression, use a G# major pentatonic scale. It's as easy as that!

Another great way to practice this is to take some songs from your MP3 player that you already know, find out the key and noodle over the top of it. Also, it's helpful to play the song several times in a row while you do your noodling so that you can get the feel and tempo of the song. While you're doing this, notice how each note of the scale sounds. Y ou might notice that one note wants to move to another note. This is called "tension". Notice how the tonic or root note sounds good at any time. It is the most restful note since it is the key of the song you're in. Also notice how any other note other than the root played at the end of a phrase makes the phrase sound like a question. That is to say that ending a phrase on the root note sounds like the period at the end of a sentence and any other note makes it sound like there's more left to be said - as if the note were a question mark or comma.

Once you get the hang of this, another exercise that I love to do is to put the radio on, use my ear to determine the key of a song, and then noodle over the top of it with the appropriate pentatonic scale. When the next song comes on, do the same thing. Some of you won't be able to do this as your ear hasn't developed yet, but it will in time. This exercise will develop both your ear and lead playing skills rapidly.

The pentatonic diagrams and how to practice them.

This is always where the rubber meets the road. Reading and doing are two different things and I promise you that the "doing" of this will most likely help you to understand this concept better than the reading portion. So, if the last few pages left you shaking your head in confusion, be encouraged because you are going to get this. As I say to my students all the time, it's helpful to look at a particular concept from several different angles. Doing so allows you to understand it at a deeper level. This goes for all subjects in life, not just guitar or music.

Now take a look at the pentatonic diagrams on the following pages. I have separated these into the A minor pentatonic scale and the C major pentatonic scale. Now also notice how both these scales share the same exact notes and the same exact patterns, but their tonics (the red circle notes) are different. Why is that? Because C major's relative minor scale is A minor. If you've read the relative major/minor section of this book already then this will be clear to you. If you have not and you want to understand the relationship of the two scales, please read that section first.

So considering everything that I've discussed already about how to use what scales over what progressions, all of the A minor forms of the pentatonic scale would work best over an A minor chord progression. To use the C major pentatonic scale, it would sound best over a C major chord progression. Now I can already hear you asking, "But they are the same scale, why can't I use either?" The answer is you can. They are the same exact scale, however over the C major chord progression, "C" is your tonic or key; over the A minor chord progression, your tonic is "A".

Form one of these diagrams is by far the most important scale pattern in all guitar playing, in all of history, for all genres, Amen! Let me say it again, form one is an invaluable pattern that you will find in all genres of guitar music. Learn it, memorize it and know it inside and out, backwards and forwards. After you have mastered form one it's up to you which forms you want to learn. I like to work my way out in either direction of form one. Memorizing each of these forms may take you several weeks, or an hour of concentrated practicing. Once you have all the forms memorized and don't have to look at the diagrams any longer, start moving them up the fretboard one fret at a time. At first you will probably only be comfortable with moving one pattern up the fretboard until you reach the end. Make sure that you work it down the fretboard and work it into the open position as well, not just down to the first fret position. As you get more acquainted with each form across the entire fretboard, then start thinking about using all the forms in one particular key before moving it up fretboard. Before you do this, it's a good practice to name the key that you are in. For instance, say "A

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minor pentatonic", before you begin the exercise and play through each form until you do a complete cycle of the guitar neck. I always start at form one and work my way up the neck. When I run out of frets, I start over in the open position and continue on until I'm back where I started. Then I move to the next key, "A# minor pentatonic", and so on. Once you do this for all the minor pentatonic scales in all the different keys, do the same routine for all the major pentatonic scales. Yes, I know it's the same forms, but starting the scale from the new major pentatonic key will help you to see these forms in both the major and minor relationship.

In regards to how to pick these scales, I practice them a few different ways. Depending on your proficiency, beginners should start off picking every note with a down stroke. After you have mastered all the forms and are then able to concentrate a bit more on the picking hand, it's important to start developing your alternate picking technique. To do this, pick the first note down and the second note up and follow this pattern to the end of the scale. Don't try to complicate this one. It's easy if you do it slowly! Just down, up, down, up, down, up, etc. Since this scale is so uniform and only has two notes per guitar string, it is a great exercise for practicing "hammer-ons" and "pull-offs". See the tablature section of this book if those terms are new to you. Otherwise, pick the lower note on each string and hammer the note just above it. If you want to practice your pull-offs, pick the higher note on each string and pull off to the note just below it.

There are literally months and possibly years of potential practice that can be gleaned from these exercises. I have used them for years and still do on a weekly basis. Be patient but persistent. These exercises will allow you to master your fretboard and develop your left and right-hand techniques.

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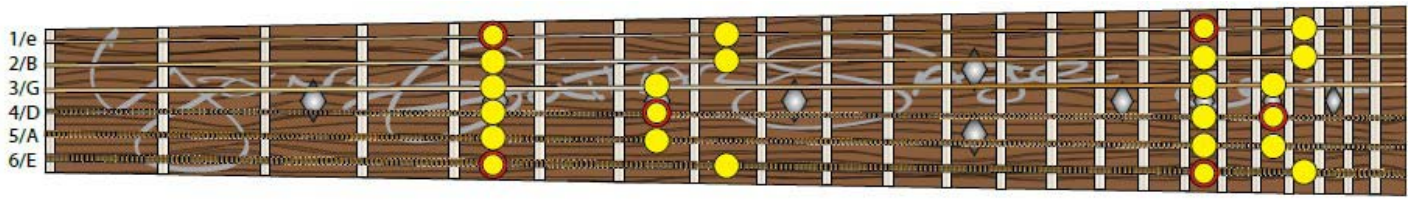
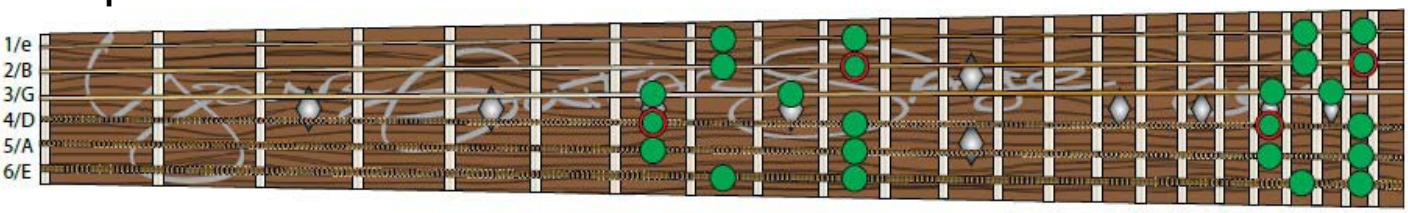
Pentatonic Scale Diagrams

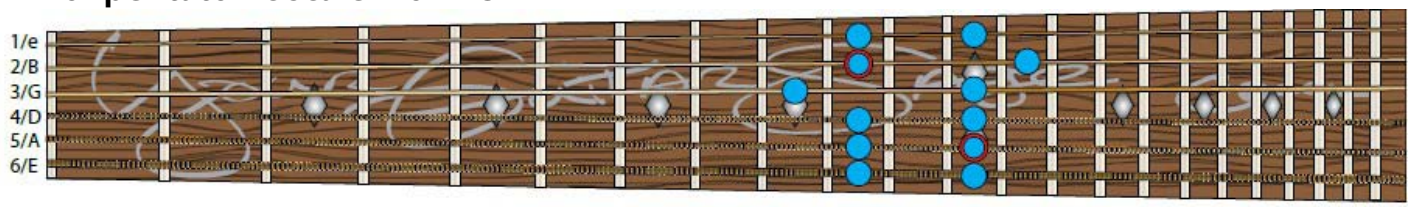
A minor pentatonic scale - form 1



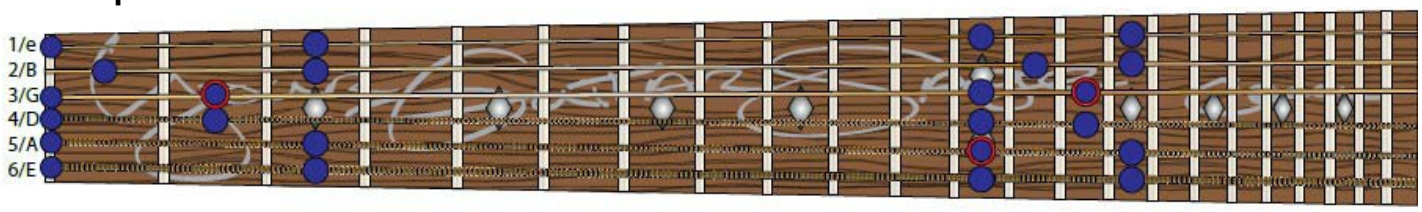
A minor pentatonic scale - form 2



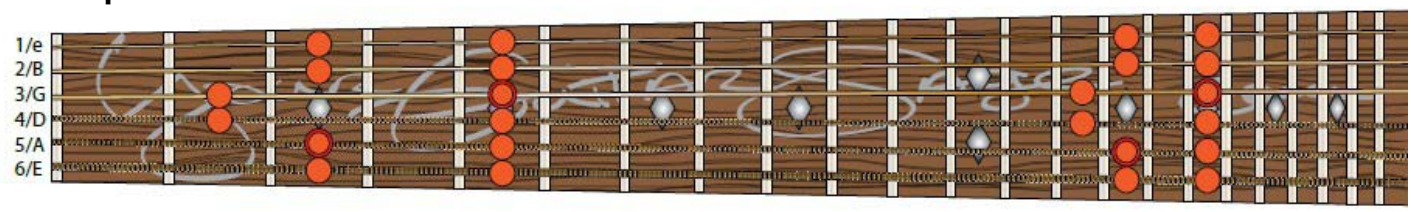
A minor pentatonic scale - form 3



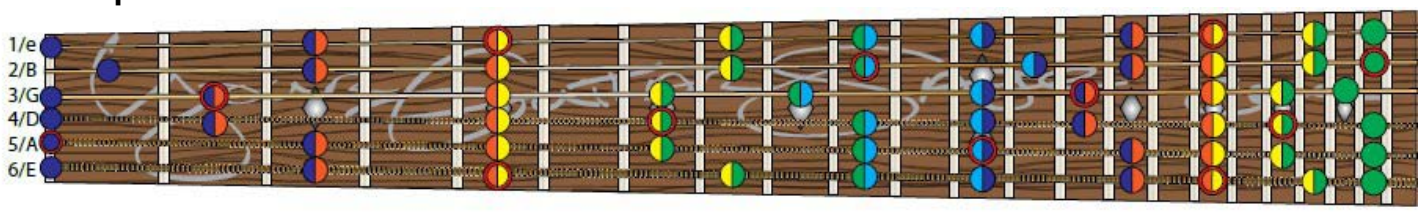
A minor pentatonic scale - form 4



A minor pentatonic scale - form 5



A minor pentatonic scale - all forms



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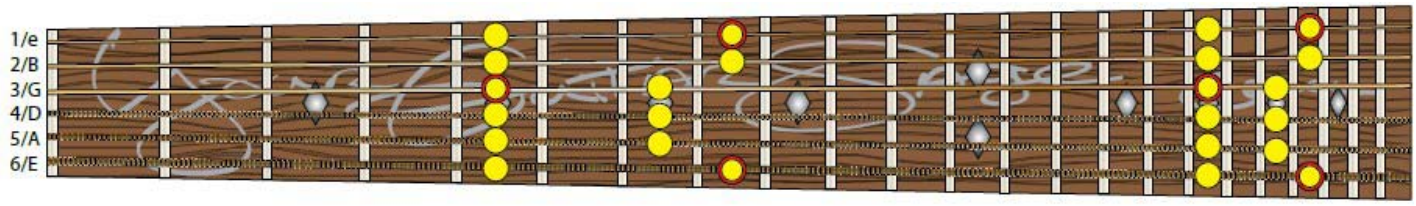
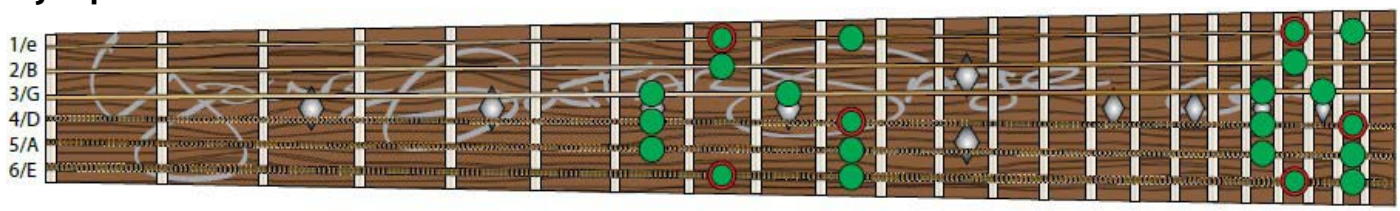
Pentatonic Scale Diagrams

C Major pentatonic scale - form 1



C Major pentatonic scale - form 2



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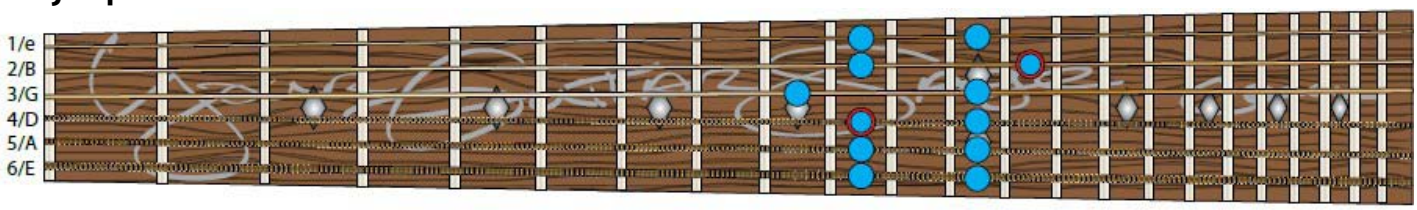

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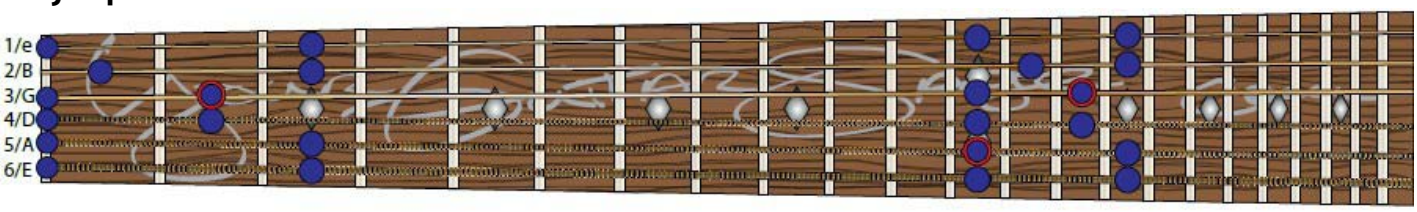

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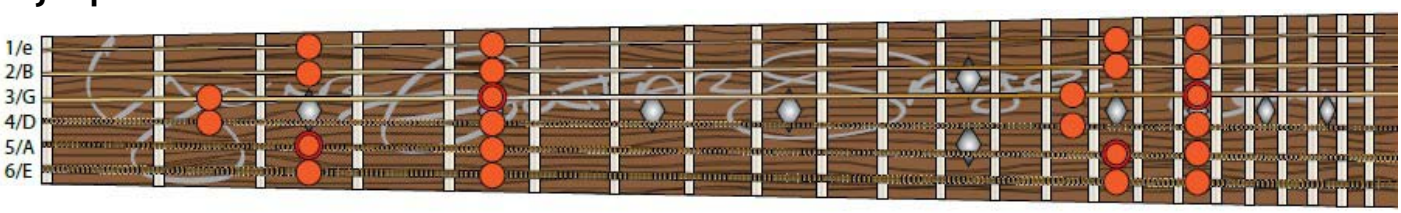
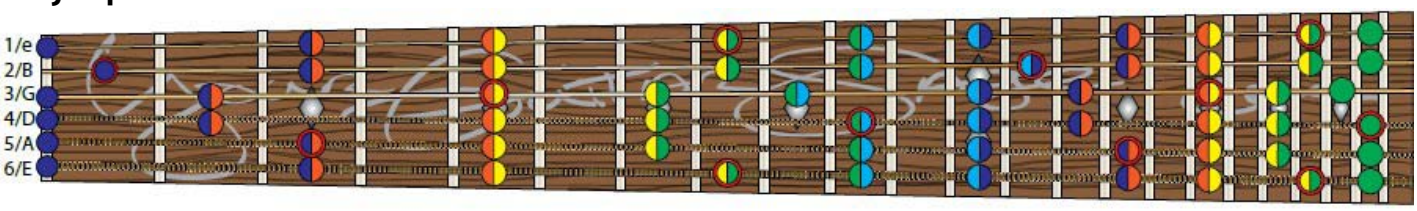


C Major pentatonic scale - all forms



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